ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

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The rise and bitter fall of ex-CIA spy

Second in a two-part series.

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In the summer of 1963, the United States was determined to help the new government in Iraq, which had come to power in a coup after Communists had been named to a number of top military posts.

The Soviet Union reacted by cutting off arms aid. Iran and Israel compounded the new regime's problems by stepping up aid to the rebellious Kurdish minority in Iraq.

The United States wanted to help the new government, but discreetly.

One sultry night in August, a fleet of unmarked transport planes swept onto the Air Force Base at Dover, Del., loaded with tanks, ammunition and guns, and headed out before dawn. Its destination: an isolated airstrip in Iraq.

It was a covert Central Intelligence Agency operation, smooth, quiet, efficient. Bruce Taylor Odell, a CIA Mideast specialist, was dispatched for three months with a special team to assist any way it could.

Odell is proud of how the CIA pulled off that mission, and of his role in its success. He thinks it represents the kind of thing CIA once could do very well.

Now, because of morale problems in the ranks, damaged public confidence, and what he insists is poor leadership, he questions whether the CIA today can perform effectively.

Odell, retired after nearly 20 years in CIA clandestine operations, has blown his cover in order to come forward and bear witness to some of the problems he says must be corrected.

Unlike some other disaffected CIA agents, he does not want to tear down the organization, publicize the names of any operatives, or jeopardize any current secret operations or capabilities.

On his last working day at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., in late December 1971, Odell removed two mottos from the wall behind his desk. One said: "Don't Assume." The other: "I Give a damn."

Those two mottos sum up as well as anything what Odell stood for during his CIA career and why he left.

An intelligence officer who takes a few snippets of information, draws broad assumptions and jumps to a hard conclusion is not worthy of the professional's cloak and dagger. Odell would go to great lengths — both when handling agents in the field and later in providing special eavesdropping devices, transmitters and other esoteric tools of the trade to agents from his Technical Services post in Washington — to assure that gaps in knowledge could be filled adequately.

And Odell gave a damn about his agents and his colleagues. But in the end, he says, he became convinced that too many of the superiors gave a damn only about furthering their careers. When he gets warmed up on that subject, his language would make former Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz blush.

Odell, at 48, does not fit the stereotype of secret agent. He is 5 foot 10, bespectacled, balding, with laugh lines around his eyes and deep furrows in his forehead. His once-lean frame now sports a pot belly, in part explained by the fact that rigorous exercise is forbidden because of injuries inflicted in 1965 when

He knows and enjoys good food and wine, books, younger unmotherly women, jazz, dancing, sailing and conversation.

Three days and nights with Odell in Boston provided ample demonstration of how he must have worked recruiting agents in the field. No sooner does he meet a stranger — a doorman, cab driver, waitress or clerk — than he is exchanging banter, discovering that person's interests, backgrounds and passions. Odell, a natural raconteur, is funny, charming, warm, ingratiating.

But when his thoughts turn to darker subjects, he looks as if he could be mean, tough, ruthless. The fact that he is alive bears that out.

Odell got into the intelligence business almost casually, without any real idea of what it was all about. As he tells it, it was the summer of 1951 and he'd just received a degree in economics from Queens University in Ontario, Canada. His maternal grandfather, Rev. R. Bruce Taylor, had been principal there some years before.

He heard of the deaths of three friends in the Korean war and decided to go back to the United States. He sought the counsel of a professor he admired. The man suggested he join the CIA and told him a story of the exploits of the OSS and other intelligence organizations during World War II. "I'd been in Canada for five years," Odell said. "I didn't know who the hell the CIA was."

He journeyed to Boston and tried to find the CIA recruiting office, but it was not in the phone book. So he went to the Navy and asked about joining Naval Intelligence. They said they had no burning need for a Canadian-trained economist just then, but slipped him a piece of paper with the address of the local CIA office.

pleasant, he said. But they had no great desire for a young economist either. So he joined the Army, serving for three years on the outskirts of Washington, D.C.

But once the CIA had been contacted, it did not lose trace of Odell. He recalls that every time he finished another course in the Army, a CIA man would show up to talk to him. One of them suggested he go to Anchorage, Alaska, and study Russian.

But Odell refused; he liked the Army. He went to Officer Candidate School and became an officer. He considered making it a career but recalls that at about that time the Army-McCarthy hearings had started and he soured on the idea.

He applied to Harvard Business School. But before he got a response, a CIA man appeared at his Army headquarters and talked him into joining the agency. He did, accepting an appointment in September 1954 at a starting salary of $4205.

After signing, he was polygraphed and then began an intensive nine-month course in clandestine operations. He was interested in the Mideast and was initially assigned to the Iran branch, where for several months, he was trained in Farsi, the Iranian language.

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